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The Presidency/Hugh Sidey

"Let's Do It"

The editorial in the Washington *Times* hit him hard on that Thursday morning. FISH OR CUT BAIT, MR. REAGAN, read the headline. These were his conservative friends talking. "If Ronald Reagan again fails to avenge the death of a defenseless American, his constituents will want to know why they sent him back for a second term."

Reagan brooded about it as he hurried through his morning briefing on the aftermath of the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro*. Although U.S. intelligence had pinpointed the terrorists in Egypt, and a scheme was being hatched to try and capture them if they fled, they were still out of reach.

Reagan's frustration was deep. He had been thwarted after the Marines and the U.S. embassy were bombed in Lebanon and following the hijacking of the TWA plane. He held only a thin hope that things would turn out differently this time. Before he left the Oval Office for another flying tour to plug tax reform, he ordered National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane to use every intelligence source available to track the ship hijackers. Then he strode to his waiting helicopter.

The editorial still rankled. As the chopper lifted off, Reagan looked over at his staff and recalled the writer's barbs. He protested to his aides: Did not his critics understand how hard it was to find these people? Did they not understand that to kill innocent bystanders would cast him as a terrorist? What he wanted, and what he would wait for, Reagan said, was "a clean one," the chance to strike directly at the guilty.

As his jet sped toward Chicago, events were unfolding that would give Reagan a clean one. But it is almost a given in the history of presidential leadership that nothing happens when it should. This caravan was a celebration for tax reform, with bands and balloons and healthy Americans cheering. The President had to wear two faces that day, one for his happy crowds in public, another for his private moments as terrorism avenger. At every critical point during the journey Reagan would turn from blaring politics to a whispered question: "Have we found them yet?"

Historians who study this episode may call it the Sara Lee decision because the moment of truth for Reagan came just after he had addressed the employees of the Sara Lee Bakery in Deerfield, Ill. By any measure it is a singularly clear look at how Ronald Reagan decides, and that is the very essence of being President.

As he spoke to the enraptured employees of Sara Lee, the word was flashed to McFarlane about the terrorists' plans to fly out of Cairo. Onstage, Reagan thundered his ire against deficits and roared another pledge to get Government spending down. "God bless you," he shouted from behind his famous grin. The red-jacketed Deerfield High School band swung into *Military Escort*, and the crowd cheered. Behind the stage in what had been an employee conference room, McFarlane and his aides waited somberly with their news. The gentle folks of Sara Lee had rented a big desk and hung an ersatz presidential seal to make the place seem properly

official. A tiny pen holder shaped like a Sara Lee truck cheeerily waved the bakery's banner. Reagan entered, the door closed, the men who run the U.S. huddled.

"Can we make sure it's them?" Reagan asked first. We could, came the answer. "What risk will there be to innocent persons?" was Reagan's next question. Not much. But what risk to the Americans carrying out the mission? And what would be the diplomatic costs? Reagan listened to the answers as the outside din began to fade.

Those gathered with the President watched his eyes, his face. There was no wrenching emotion. Something inside the man had hardened long ago, and now the pieces were being fitted into place. At last, a clean shot. Reagan's questions and the answers took just two minutes. A few more seconds ticked off. "Let's do it," he said evenly. In 25 minutes his orders were in the heads of F-14 pilots on the deck of the carrier *Saratoga* in the Mediterranean.

Rarely have the intelligence, diplomatic and military apparatus of the United States been in such good shape. Perhaps that is one reason Reagan could move through this drama so effortlessly. He had faith in his system. He did not pick over the details of the intercept plan, as Jimmy Carter did for the ill-fated Desert One raid in Iran. He did not ask who was at the other end of the command line, as John Kennedy did when he sent troops over the autobahn into West Berlin. Reagan trusted them all, whoever they might be, right down to the nameless young men flying in their F-14's.

Later Reagan would learn that Vice Admiral Frank Kelso, commander of the Sixth Fleet, was in the Mediterranean's gentle swells aboard the U.S.S. *Coronado*, holding together the whole effort. Kelso was not even an aviator. He was a submariner. And Rear Admiral David Jeremiah, commander of Task Force 60, which was the *Saratoga* and support ships, was a destroyer skipper gone upstairs. Old Navy hands swore that Reagan's faith was a principal factor in the extra effort. "The President never questioned whether we could do it or not," Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger recalled last week. "He trusted us totally. And if it had not worked, he would not have blamed us. I've said it for a long time. He has better judgment than all the rest of us put together."

Events moved to their climax as the President neared Washington and Air Force One settled for a landing at Andrews Air Force Base. On the helicopter back to the White House, Reagan was already off on another adventure, contending with another adversary. He looked down at the lights of the Capitol and wondered what he should do to persuade Democratic Leader Robert Byrd to release more than 5,000 military and civil nominations that the Senator had bottled up in his pique at the President. That is another untold story for another time. Whatever Reagan did, or did not do, Byrd soon hurriedly pushed the nominations through the Senate.

Reagan in Deerfield: waiting for a clean strike at the terrorists